

# Restoring the (Dis)course

## A Philosophical Inquiry into Rivers and Educational Journeys

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EACH YEAR OF MY CHILDHOOD, I eagerly anticipated my family's annual summer inner tube float trip on the Elk River. Located just over an hour's drive from my hometown in southeastern Kansas, these trips provided a unique opportunity for me to learn about the constantly changing nature of rivers through firsthand experience. While floating down the river, I was immersed in a variety of hydrological lessons associated with characteristics of the river water, such as depth, temperature, clarity, and speed, which all varied from year to year. As I entered high school, I also learned about the ways in which human activity can influence rivers, including the physical altering of their shape. Beyond its physical and biological characteristics, the river provides a compelling metaphor for lived experience. Just as the importance of allowing a river to run its natural course is often overlooked, the value of embracing lived experience in an educational setting is commonly ignored. Embracing lived experience in educational settings is crucial for curriculum and pedagogy. In the context of reconceptualized curriculum studies, curriculum was significantly broadened when viewed through the lens of "*currere*," which is Latin and denotes the running of a course (Pinar et al., 2004). This reconceptualization transformed curriculum studies from a focus on *curriculum development* to *understanding curriculum*, especially in the context of lived experience.

In this paper, I will use the idea of a natural meandering river to metaphorically illustrate the value of the reconceptualization of curriculum studies and contrast the reconceptualization with the focus on efficiency and *technical rationality*. Technical rationality is a term coined by James Macdonald that embodies the perspective that schools exist to facilitate and produce learning according to pre-established goals and objectives (Aiken, 2010). The term also indicates the viewpoint that learning can be "objectified, quantified, and measured" as scientism (p. 253). Used to justify the existence of schools as a means to promote and produce learning based on predetermined standards and accountability, technical rationality treats education like a conveyor belt in a factory. However, as I argue in this paper, an overemphasis on efficiency, scientific management, and positivism is not sustainable from the perspective of thinking critically, understanding oneself, and challenging the power dynamics and underlying assumptions that guide

individual and group decisions and behavior over time. Alternatively, viewing the scholarly journey of a student and the study of beauty (aesthetics) as a meandering and naturally flowing river opens holistic possibilities for advancing reconceptualized curriculum theorizing.

### **The Reconceptualization in Curriculum Studies**

The Reconceptualization in curriculum studies refers to a movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in response to the traditional and prescriptive approach to curriculum development (Aiken, 2010). Reconceptualists argued that the traditional approach, which focused on the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student and emphasized the value of objective, factual knowledge, was inadequate for addressing the complex social, cultural, and political issues of the time.

In response to the factory model approach to curriculum, Reconceptualists proposed a new perspective that emphasized curriculum as a complicated conversation that took into account a variety of perspectives (Pinar et al., 2004). This included the needs, interests, and experiences of students and emphasized the value of subjectivity critical thinking and reflexivity. Reconceptualists argued that curriculum should be seen not as a fixed set of objectives or goals, but rather as a dynamic process of negotiation and co-construction between teachers, students, and the wider community. In the reconceptualized vernacular, the term “*currere*” is often used to emphasize the idea that curriculum should be viewed as a process, rather than a fixed set of content or a predetermined set of outcomes (Pinar, 1974). Also, *currere* is often used to represent the idea that curriculum should be seen as a dynamic, ongoing process that involves the interaction of multiple stakeholders and is shaped by the experiences and needs of learners (Gouzouasis & Wiebe, 2018; Pinar, 1974).

Reconceptualists sought out intellectual traditions and modes of inquiry that prioritized the nature of human experience and the role of human agency as central to curricular research (Aiken, 2010). Aiken (2010) observes that alternative forms of inquiry were emphasized by the Reconceptualists noting that,

In response [to the positivistic overemphasis on science-informed curriculum research], the reconceptualists called for a focus on phenomenology and proposed a research agenda that encouraged alternative curriculum research theories and methodologies and that would take into consideration students’ and teachers’ experiences from aesthetic, gendered, cultural, autobiographical, and ethnographic perspectives. Thus, the scientific styles of research that favored objective, detached, standardized methodologies, allegedly leading to reliable knowledge, were given over to expanded studies of the educational experiences through more humanistic approaches that spanned philosophical examinations, as well as autobiographical, artistic, spiritual, and interpretative modes of investigation. (p. 254)

Accordingly, the reconceptualist approach to curriculum can be characterized by a dynamic and evolving focus on subjectivity, interiority, experiential learning, critical thinking, and the interdisciplinary study of educational experience. Importantly, as stated earlier, reconceptualized curriculum studies emphasizes understanding curriculum versus developing curriculum.

## **River Straightening**

There are a variety of reasons why humans may straighten or channelize rivers. These can include (but are not limited to) flood control, maintenance, or enhancement of the navigability of a river (e.g., for large watercraft), land drainage improvement, creation of new spaces for urbanization or agriculture, and reduction of bank erosion (Surian, 2007). However, the process of straightening a river has negative impacts on the environment (Koebel, 1995; Surian, 2007).

One major impact is the alteration of river dynamics. Straightening a river can change the flow patterns and velocity of the water, which leads to erosion and sedimentation issues (Koebel, 1995). These changes also disrupt the natural movement of sediment and nutrients downstream, potentially affecting the health of downstream ecosystems (Koebel, 1995; Surian, 2007).

In addition to changes in river dynamics, channelization also negatively impacts water quality. Straightening a river can increase the amount of impervious surface (such as concrete or asphalt) in the surrounding area, leading to increased runoff and water pollution (Koebel, 1995; Surian, 2007). This harms aquatic life and decreases the overall health and biodiversity of the river ecosystem.

Finally, channelization can also have negative impacts on aquatic and riparian (river edge) ecology. Straightening a river can reduce habitat complexity and decrease the availability of food and shelter for aquatic organisms (Surian, 2007). It can also lead to the loss of riparian vegetation, which provides important ecological functions such as water filtration and erosion control (Koebel, 1995; Surian, 2007).

In summary, straightening or channelizing a river has negative impacts on river dynamics, water quality, and aquatic and riparian ecology. These impacts are harmful to the overall health and functioning of the river ecosystem. One example that illustrates the damage from channelizing a river is on the Kissimmee River in Florida. In the 1990s, a restoration project was undertaken on a section of the Kissimmee River to address the environmental harm caused by the straightening of the river in the 1960s (Koebel, 1995). The straightening of the river had led to the destruction of wetland and the loss of habitat for wildlife, among other negative impacts (Koebel, 1995). This restoration project involved the construction of berms and weirs to recreate the river's original meandering course and restore its floodplain ecosystem. The restoration project has been successful in reestablishing the natural flow of the river and improving the ecological health of the region. This illustrates the importance of considering the long-term consequences of human intervention in natural systems and the value of efforts to repair such damage.

### **Relating the Reconceptualization to a Wild River**

I argue that the work of the curriculum studies Reconceptualists can be compared to the effort of keeping a natural river wild and allowing it to take its natural meandering course. Both approaches prioritize a holistic and wild approach, and in the case of the Reconceptualization the re-wilding has to do with theory, research, curriculum, and pedagogy (Hensley, 2011).

The Reconceptualization recognizes that traditional models of education often emphasize rote memorization and conformity to established norms and standards and fail to adequately prepare students for a complex and rapidly changing world. Accordingly, Reconceptualists advocate for a more holistic and student-centered approach to education that emphasizes critical thinking, self-reflection, and agency.

Just as a natural river follows its own course, shaped by the forces of nature and the environment in which it exists, the Reconceptualists argue that education should be shaped by the needs, interests, and experiences of the individual students, rather than being dictated by external standards and expectations. For example, rather than following a strict curriculum that dictates what students should learn and how they should learn it, the Reconceptualists might encourage educators to pragmatically shift curriculum to the specific place in which learning is occurring. Additionally, through the reconceptualist lens, teachers are encouraged to model and cultivate reflective learners who can reflexively evolve through various learning experiences. In this sense, educators are encouraged to create a more flexible and adaptable learning environment that allows students to explore their own interests and discover their own unique paths to knowledge and understanding. The reconceptualist approach values the inherent curiosity and agency of students and recognizes that learning is an ongoing and dynamic process that needs to be shaped by the students themselves, rather than primarily being dictated by external forces. Thus, the Reconceptualists' work can be seen as a call to reimagine traditional approaches to education and to embrace a more holistic and organic approach that values the unique experiences and needs of each individual student. Just as a natural river takes its own course, guided by the forces of nature, the Reconceptualists argue that education should be shaped by the needs, interests, and experiences of the students themselves, rather than being dictated by external standards and expectations.

Like the channelization of rivers, an overemphasis on predetermined learning outcomes and standardized testing pervades modern day educational discourse and encourages the reduction of direct experience in favor of “reliving” other people’s experiences. Ultimately, in traditional education approaches, efficiency is emphasized as risk is minimized (Hensley, 2011). Agency is sacrificed for increased test scores, and dialogue is replaced with scripted instructional cues. These are all symptoms of the “dangers of realism,” which ultimately translate into what Cornel West (as quoted in Doll, 2000) refers to as a “paralyzing pessimism” (p. 5). Realism is a philosophical position that holds that the external world exists independently of our perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about it. According to Mary Doll, realism overemphasizes the importance of objective knowledge and the objective reality of the external world. Doll suggests that realism typically rejects the value of subjective and lived experience due to its lack of measurability. Doll maintains that realism marks our era and leads to a death of the spirit, which is what an overfocus on standards and accountability is doing in our schools. Accordingly, Doll insists that there needs to be a “dynamic unsettling” and a transformational reconceptualization of human experience (p. 53). Borrowing the term from Clare Hammoor (2023), I argue that the ecological crisis and the necessity to advance the sustainability movement require a “playful instability” (p. 289) characterized by experimentation and creativity in finding solutions to social and environmental problems. This also involves thinking outside of conventional problem-solving approaches, which can lead to more innovative and effective solutions to seemingly intractable sustainability issues.

### **Poetry and Educational Experience**

*Poetry allows us to see ourselves freshly and keenly. It makes the invisible world visible.* (Parini, 2008, as quoted in Faulkner, 2009, p. 15)

One approach to facilitating introspection and giving students the space to connect their lived experience with their learning is the use of poetic inquiry. Poetic inquiry is a method of research that uses poetry and other forms of creative writing as a way of exploring and

understanding a particular topic or issue. Poetic inquiry, according to Jane Hirshfield, is a “different mode of knowing” (as quoted in Faulkner, 2009, p. 16) and encourages evocative writing that is personal, creative, and expressive. Hirshfield asserts that every good poem harbors a profound and unforeseen transformative surprise (Housden, 2021). Consequently, students who delve into poetic inquiry are not only more likely to experience personal engagement and transformation but also more likely to captivate and transform their readers.

In the realm of poetic discourse, there is great possibility and richness. Poetry, much like the meandering pathways of untamed rivers, serves as a method of expression for the intricate and winding pathways of lived experience. It is through poetry that humans can reclaim their connection to their dreams and the profound archetypes that reside within them. As Gary Snyder (1995) illuminates, poetry possesses the power to not only integrate and stabilize, but also to rupture the habitual patterns of perception and allow for the exploration of diverse possibilities. These possibilities may vary in their wisdom or peculiarity, yet they all hold equal weight as authentic realities, and some may even offer new perspectives and insights (p. 93).

In this context, the aesthetic journey takes on a crucial role, encompassing the breaking open of established perceptions, challenging hegemonic dispositions, and transforming the mundane into the extraordinary. Furthermore, an essential aspect of poetic discourse lies in attuning oneself to their own idiosyncrasies and embracing their individual quirkiness. It is through this attentive and liberated state of being that true liberation can be found.

Instead of enabling students to learn through an experiential process and become more fully human, contemporary education inundates students with standardized testing. Today’s educational model is notorious for not allowing students to gain their own voices and choices; instead, students follow a prescriptive educational pathway. The emphasis on standardization is reflected in the focus on educational standards and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields and the shrinking of the arts. An overemphasis on STEM education can limit student exposure to other subjects and ways of thinking, preventing students from discovering their passions and interests outside of the STEM fields. Much of science education does not embrace a dynamic worldview that weaves together knowledge from multiple disciplines and perspectives. In this sense, it is important to go beyond the tunnel vision of STEM-centric teaching.

The self-reflection and introspection inherent in reconceptualized curriculum studies align with the exploration of lived experience and life writing. By engaging in self-reflection and solitude, individuals can attain a “petit mort” or a temporary release from the confines of conventional discourse (Jensen, 2004). This departure from traditional modes of thinking and learning creates space for new and progressive approaches. In the realm of education, a “petit mort” signifies a transformative process, shedding old and inadequate ways of knowing and transcending the everyday discourse associated with conventional teaching and learning. However, transcending the familiar is not without discomfort; it entails stepping outside the comfort zone and confronting the unfamiliar, a necessary step when addressing complex sustainability challenges.

The discomfort and disequilibrium experienced in this process serve as catalysts for inquiry and growth in learners. Kathleen Norris (2001) highlights the importance of facing one’s shadow, stating that growth is hindered when we avoid confronting the unconscious aspects of ourselves (p. 99). The term “shadow” in psychology refers to the unconscious elements of the self that may conflict with our conscious values and beliefs. These hidden aspects can encompass negative emotions and traits we attempt to conceal, such as anger, jealousy, or insecurity. By acknowledging and confronting our shadows, we cultivate self-awareness and integrate our conscious and unconscious lives. This holistic integration enables us to become more well-rounded



individuals, fostering greater emotional and psychological well-being. Embracing our shadow, therefore, becomes a pathway to living more fully.

In parallel, Schiller's concept of play and Snyder's notion of wildness resonate with this transformative process. Playfulness and wildness both involve breaking away from conventional structures and thinking patterns. Schiller (1965) emphasizes that play is an integral part of being human, enabling us to embrace our full humanity (p. 80). Snyder (2000) describes wildness as the essential nature of nature itself, a state of open awareness that reflects the untamed and self-organizing aspects of the human mind (p. 128). Both play and wildness challenge rigid ways of knowing and invite us to explore new possibilities. In this context, literary art emerges as a medium that embodies the spirit of play and wildness, offering a diverse and intellectually engaging approach to understanding the world (Snyder, 2000, p. 129).

By engaging in self-reflection, embracing our shadows, and incorporating play and wildness into our educational and personal journeys, we transcend conventional modes of thinking and open ourselves to new perspectives and possibilities. These transformative processes enable us to become more fully alive, fostering deeper connections with ourselves, others, and the world around us.

Snyder reminds us that we must never surrender our sense of awe. Instead, we must continue to engage in the artistic literary process. Similarly, Rabbi Abraham Heschel (as quoted in Fox, 2006) says, “Forfeit your sense of awe and the universe becomes a marketplace for you” (p. 53). When awe is removed, commercialism moves in and takes its place. Awe is a structural necessity to healthy pluralistic thought. Inversely, apathy can erode the banks of direct experience and allow other people’s experiences to invade. As Maxine Greene (2001) states, “to be sunk in habitual routines, to be merely passive is ... to miss an opportunity for awakening,” whereas aesthetic experiences “provoke a change in the way we see things [and] bring about transformation in our thinking” (pp. 98, 102). In the end, aesthetic education is situated well for transformations and awakenings. Greene’s work is aimed at “opening new pathways in lived experience, breaking the taken-for-granted, setting aside the crusts of mere conformity” (p. 186). Thus, pursuing aesthetics and the humanities are ways to work towards a more integrated wholeness in one’s life journey.

John Dewey (1934, as quoted in Greene, 2001) states that “imagination is a way of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole” (p. 81). Thus, imagination is an integrative context for human self-discovery. Buckminster Fuller (as quoted in Fox, 2006) poses the question of how we might “think in terms of wholes” (p. 105). He is implying that we must seek out the right balance of analytical and interpretive thinking for our journey. In the realms of thinking and education, thinking holistically favors interpretive thought over analytical thought. Thomas Merton (1974, as quoted in Palmer, 2004) claims that “there is in all things ... a hidden wholeness” (p. 4). Thus, the capacity to feel more integrated and balanced is within all of us. “Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life” (Palmer, 2004, p. 5).

### **Joy and Aesthetics**

In the realm of education, fostering joy and embracing the inquiry process are essential. Thomas Aquinas (as quoted in Fox, 2006), highlights the significance of joy as “the human's noblest act” (p. 28). Aquinas emphasizes the need for joy and education to intertwine, as we should

strive to learn and nurture our noble capacities (Fox, 2006, p. 28). Consequently, teaching in an aesthetic manner becomes closely linked to evoking joy. Maxine Greene (2001) explains that when we engage our imagination with our perceptions, embody them, and make them our own, joy emerges. This infusion of conscious awareness allows for new and unexpected patterns to surface, offering fresh perspectives and vantage points (p. 11).

Therefore, the intellectual pursuit of learning can be playfully enhanced by deliberately integrating aesthetics. It is crucial to “release the imagination” and let it become an inseparable part of the lived experience. By doing so, we unlock the potential to evoke joy, enabling individuals to truly appreciate the journey of life. Encouraging joy and infusing aesthetics in education creates an environment where learning becomes a source of delight, empowering students to explore, discover, and embrace their noble capacities.

### Conclusion

An examination of the pathways taken through lived experience is one of the worthiest inquiries on which we can embark. Teachers and educational theorists need to recognize the value of incorporating lived experience and aesthetics in a learning environment. We need to be aware of the tendency to remove direct experience and the aesthetic perspective from the educational landscape. To sustain the discourse associated with experiential education, it is crucial that we protect direct experience from the “an-aesthetic” (similar to anesthesia) influence of pre-determined standardized curriculum. I submit that we must not “channelize” human experiences and compromise the wholeness of individual educational journeys. The metaphor of river straightening is a valuable starting point for the discussion surrounding aesthetics and education.

Experiential education and the incorporation of lived experience and aesthetics in the learning environment are crucial to fostering a sense of place and sense of connection to the world around us. By providing students with opportunities to engage with and learn from direct experience, we can help them to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for the complexities of the natural and social world and move beyond pre-determined standardized curriculum and pedagogy. We must allow students to explore and learn in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their own lives and experiences and empower them to draw from their lived experience reflexively on their journey. By doing so, we can create a more vibrant and dynamic educational landscape that enables students to engage fully with the sinuosity of lived experience. Accordingly, it is important to “re-wild” our rivers and “re-wild” education.

Rewilding our rivers is an important step towards restoring the balance and awe that is necessary for a healthy and sustainable world. We must take this same approach to rewilding education and recognize the value of incorporating lived experience and aesthetics in a learning environment. We cannot afford to surrender our sense of awe or allow apathy to erode the banks of direct experience. We must release our imagination and allow it to be an inextricable part of our lived experience in education. This will evoke the joy that allows us to truly appreciate the educational journey and to seek out the right balance for our journey, just as the rewilding of our rivers is essential for the health and balance of our natural world.

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